

Residents Can't Stay And Can't Move

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Garden Springs, located on North Avenue, is one of the few affordable housing venues remaining in Athens-Clarke County. Now, after being sold to investors for \$1.7 million, it is destined to become another sparkling, upscale student apartment complex. Residents like Hill are being told to move their trailers by the first of October so that the project can begin as scheduled.

It may seem like business as usual, but there are extenuating circumstances that will tremendously affect the lives of Garden Springs residents. For example, because it is a low-income community, many people simply cannot afford the costs of moving their homes to other lots. To make matters worse, homes in Garden Springs that were built before 1976 are restricted by Athens-Clarke County from being transported from their current locations to other available spots within the county.

Hill, who owns a 1985 trailer, says that though this regulation does not apply to her, she is still confronted with the possibility of losing her home.

"We need time to get the money up to move."

Even if residents were granted more time, options to move their homes to other sites in Athens remain few. Barbara Champion, a hospital clinical technician, says that land lots in Athens are difficult to find because the county is rapidly shutting down mobile home parks. She adds that the remaining parks in the area impose several restrictions.

"They, the other parks, just don't want any more trailers," she says.

Champion says it would cost \$4500 for her, her husband, and her four children to leave Garden Springs.

"We're just not sitting on that kind of money. And, on top of that, we'll have to pay an inspector to come out and tell us if we're even allowed to move it," she says, the frustration evident in her voice. "If we can't get the money, me and my kids won't have anywhere to go."

Though faced with homelessness themselves, Hill and Champion admit they are more fortunate than other residents in the Garden Springs community.

"One of my neighbors is on oxygen and in a wheelchair," says Champion, her voice rising slightly. "Tell me, what's she going to do?"

gardensprings2.jpg

Garden Springs residents are taking steps to try and save their homes, some of which have been renovated and lovingly restored over the years. A June 28 meeting with several ACC Commissioners "helped a little," says Hill.

The meeting produced suggestions to rally support for the endangered park, including organizing committees to raise awareness in Athens and informing the media in Florida, the developer's home base, to increase involvement there.

"I wish they would say, 'we're not going to mess with these people,'" Champion declares. "I wish they would say 'these people don't have to go anywhere.'"

While they scramble to find a solution, residents say the previous owner of Garden Springs, Neal Holland of Vermont, is nowhere to be found.

"He won't come and talk to us," says Champion. "He hasn't been to any of the meetings." She says that on one occasion, she was granted the opportunity to speak with Holland, who claimed to have no idea that most Garden Springs residents had actually purchased their trailers at the time he sold the park.

"I believe he did know," Champion says.

Residents are also upset with the lack of notification about their upcoming evictions. Both Champion and Hill say they discovered the situation through "coincidence" and "word of mouth," after the park had already been sold. Another resident, who wishes to remain anonymous, says that she learned about the eviction from a friend who happened to mention it one day at the store.

"It's a cold way to find out that we're being sold out," she says, adding that she never believed the owner would "just up and sell the park."

The official eviction notices have yet to be served. This is scheduled to happen on the first of August, according to Champion.

Despite residents' outrage, frustration, and attempts to plead their case, Hill claims the response from the opposition is less than what they expected.

"We're doing all we can," she replies. "And we really aren't getting any answers or help."

The Athens Land Trust is trying to help. The Trust has set up a fund for tax-deductible donations to be used to help Garden Springs residents "attain safe, affordable housing either in their present location or at an alternative site." Donations can be mailed to The Athens Land Trust, 195 Park Avenue, Athens, 30601.

In the meantime, Champion and her neighbors are working against the clock.

"I hate to lose my home," Champion sighs. "And not because I haven't paid my bills, but because I can't afford to move."